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EUGENIUS; OR, EVERYBODY HIS OWN CRITIC

LIKE the psychologist, the pedagogue is very much with us at present. Our restless world is astir with educational hopes. The teaching and modelling of the young mind is itself being remodelled and reshaped at all its stages, and chiefly at the earliest, that of elementary studies. The spirit of the new methods, some of which are no longer experimental, but have proved themselves, is all in favor of cultivating the personality of the child. Its imagination is to be awakened, its attention appealed to, its faculties quickened, along the lines which nature herself has laid down; the response, such as it may be, of each temperament to each stimulus, is the precious germ out of which every mental development must grow. To correct and curb, if need be, those instinctive powers, to supply, as best one can, their deficiencies, is a necessary but a less essential task; the worth and the happiness of the individual, the well-being and the progress of the species, are all contained in the intuitive susceptibilities of the tender life, that spontaneous promise, which no amount of feeding and nursing can replace if withered or destroyed.

We may regret that the contagion of those subtle, yet simple and efficient methods of approach, should not have spread more definitely to the higher levels of education. What is true of the child is true as well of the young man or woman; the reaction of personality to the stimulus of beauty in words is at all ages the genuine productive in-

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fluence, that from which the enlargement and refining of mind and heart can be expected; and there is no more real profit to be sought in the study of literature, than just that enlargement and refining. If the young people are to be trained in the suppression of self, let them learn by handling some impersonal instrument. If they are to assimilate the rigor of a severe method, and the objectivity of the pure search for truth, let the sciences—those of matter preferably, but the various branches of history as well—be used for that purpose. Algebra or physics are the proper means for the apprenticeship to an inquisitive but dispassionate mood, that follows the working out of an equation or of a problem. If the nice weighing of evidence and the sifting of tangled psychological issues are in question, let the story of the human past—of political, social, economic facts—furnish the texts. But let not the soul-expanding creation of an imaginary world, in which the stature of our kind is the same and yet is greater, be divested of its own special virtue, that of being subject to the laws of quality, not quantity. Literature is precisely the expression and reflection of spiritual man; its humanity is its all in all; to use it as a collection of documents like any other is to rob it of its privilege. One sees the loss; what gain is one to set over against it, if the scientific habit of mind can be acquired as well, or better, from a hundred other disciplines?

The student who does not set out to be a specialist in the history of letters—that is to say, every student but about one per cent—may then well be liberated from the gratuitous duty to annihilate his natural desire for self-expression. Great books will serve their most substantial end, if they are an incentive to the realization of his personality, intellectual, emotional, moral. His own mind will find itself in the hard exciting tussle with a master spirit—a

struggle in which he will be conquered, but out of which he will emerge a fuller man. This psychological interpretation is, we have seen, the very method and object of the critic. Every young man and woman who approaches literature is thus placed in the conditions of the critical activity, and the aim of higher literary studies is to make everybody his own critic. It is only a question of degree, between a Hazlitt or a Sainte-Beuve, and the sincere appreciation of a beginner—provided it be sincere; impressions may be raw, short-sighted, untutored; but they are æsthetically and psychologically productive, if only they are the outcome of actual contact.

The prospect of building the higher study of literature on the foundation of ignorant or naive reactions to texts, will rouse the sceptical wonder of many, the ironic scorn of not a few. But the democracy of the spirit is no less to be desired, and much more certainly to be attained, than that of political rights; it consists, not in the equal possession of a franchise, one and the same for all, but in the participation, to whatever degree, in the life of the imaginative sensibilities. Here the varieties and differences of individual nature remain indeed supreme; no equality can be spoken of; the hope of the democrat, and the foundation of our faith in letters as a formative principle of culture, is that from every mind, however slow, dim, heavy, encumbered by animality or routine, a spark may be struck out. Although the social sphere of the universities is extending more and more, and takes in a very large part of the national body, the normal student comes to college with the benefit of some educational advantages and facilities; he belongs, most often, to circles where literacy is general, and of long standing; he has breathed an air charged with active æsthetic influences; in the majority of cases, he stands

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above the lower quality of his fellows in his response to literary stimulus. Such is the permeation of all human material by a subtle diffused essence of civilization, at the present day, that the most unsophisticated sons of the people, the least touched by artificial cultivation, are even sometimes the most vigorous and original, as they are the freshest, in their reactions. No more is needed, to put the higher study of literature on its genuine, secure basis: the assumption that the average man and woman will display a fair measure of sympathy with the spiritual meaning of authors and books. What will be erected upon that basis, depends very largely on the teacher.

The teacher, no doubt, will see difficulties and raise objections; the more stubborn, perhaps, as he has more experience. It would be of no use to ignore the fact that a disinclination to rely much on that personal reaction to texts is a feature of the educational system of some countries; and it would be idle to pretend, that at least in the field of higher teaching, the United States did not show that aversion. Certain reasons may account for the circumstance that the method of appeal to the literary sensibilities is very often fought shy of in this country. Too much should not be made of the fact that for a long time the most conscious effort of the American colleges was to train themselves in a severe objectivity, the example of which was given to the world by Germany; other nations were following that lead, or evolving the same discipline, and still left a freer scope to the personal response of the student. The objective ideal was set up in America with such rigor, only because it answered somehow to the intellectual temperament of many students. And here it is that the incredulous teacher may find some support in the view commonly held of the psychology of young Americans. Most of them, he will say, are

tongue-tied when they are asked for genuine literary impressions; put to them a question of that sort, and the sheepy eye will appear; they have no facility that way; the gift of easy self-expression has been refused them; they even look upon it, in principle, with distrust: they do not care to show their feelings. If you try to prevail upon them, and to conquer the shame that paralyzes all open confession of their moods, you will drive them for shelter to ready-made formulæ; instead of being themselves, they will under the strain be anybody else, and repeat mere words.

That state of things prevails often enough indeed; but it is very far from being universal. It seems to correspond rather with the idiosyncrasies of the typical young Anglo-Saxon—and especially the English—than with that of that very different person, the young American. One cannot have gathered any experience of university life in this country, without being struck by the genuine interest which the students of both sexes—and perhaps especially the women—feel in literature. The vivacity, the intelligent eagerness, with which they will respond to appeals of that kind, are very obvious; and not only the best, but the majority, show themselves quite capable of sincere and vivid literary discriminations. It looks as if the responsibility for the future, in that matter, rested decidedly with the teachers, not with the taught. Much could be done, to spread the responsiveness more evenly, and make the total absence of it an exception. A complex no doubt, has with many to be solved; a stiffness of feeling or of language has to be loosened; a free passage has to be opened for the current of self-expression. That will be done easily enough, in a surprising number of cases, if the teacher has the gift, the magnetism, the sympathetic touch; if he has life in him, and can communicate life. The best foundation, of course, for that normal

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activity of the sensibilities in the literary plane, will have been laid in the secondary school.

Again, it might be objected here, that what the secondary school has done, the university need not be doing a second time. Why duplicate effort in that way? And should not higher studies imply a passage to some more impersonal mode of thinking? This, we hope to have shown, is begging the question; impersonality may be the very thing elsewhere, in other departments; except for special objects, to study literature impersonally is a paradox. Moreover, the interpretation of texts need not assume an entirely new character, when we pass on from school to college; it should only be deepened and broadened. Instead of mere repetition or total change, there must be a linking up in method and spirit, from the lower to the higher. Here, of all places, the growth of the inner man should be paralleled by the smooth development of method; continuity is the breath of the humanities.

The problem is thus seen to narrow down to a matter of practical pedagogy. How is the routine of teaching reconcilable with the sincerity, the surprise, the ever fresh spontaneousness, which mental life in the plane of literary impressions demands? It is not of course to be thought of, that a college class should come to resemble a gathering of literati and wits, each airing his or her opinion of the last best seller, and too much preoccupied with the scoring of a hit, to bother much about discipline, coherence, and concerted effort. But although this happy state of freedom may be approximated in narrow circles of the elect, living under grace, not under law—by which is meant, needless to say, a seminar for the profitable enjoyment, not for the dissection of literature—satisfactory means have long been found to regulate and coördinate, whilst stimulating it, the play of

what is perhaps most individualistic in life, the artistic susceptibilities of the young.

The study of texts is the broad common ground on which all programmes and all methods meet. The thoughts, emotions and art of a writer, subjected to group interpretation, give the discussion the fixed permanent basis which is indispensable, whilst allowing a certain margin to the personal reaction of each member. The set of difficulties encountered is such, as to call into play the sense of objectivity, at the same time as the subjective element in every response. An author of standing, and especially a classic (in the general acceptance of the term) represents a sum of values, which the thrashing out of time has definitely enough characterized and circumscribed; by the relatively stable test of those values, the perceptions of single students can be tried, as measuring up to a certain normality, a sanity of taste; and on the other hand, a chance is given to the expression of those original shades, which, however slight, are the birth-right of every sincere reader of books, and should no more be repressed than they should be artificially forced and consciously sought after. If anything, it is possible to confess that the teaching of literature has in itself the seed of authoritative dogmatism; most writers studied in class are well worn with the attention of ages; the instructor, however liberal, is apt to regard himself as the representative of a tradition, the holder of a sacred trust, the corrector of erratic freaks; the atmosphere of the classroom, as a rule, would be freer and livelier, if a spice more of tolerance could sweeten literary discussion.

At all events, the time-honored study of texts is not to be dispossessed of its privilege, as the typical and most ordinary exercise. On the contrary, fresh lustre, and more substantial rights, should be added to its dignity. It is really

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and in the full sense the living heart of the whole process of literary interpretation. It should thus be attended and ministered to by all the other activities; the work of a class should lead up to it in every way.

Contact is to be established between the minds of the students and that of the writer, as revealed in a book. The printed page will speak for itself; nothing can replace, as nothing approaches, the significance of those words selected by a mood eager for realization; but to work back from the expression to the feeling, and from the feeling to the personality, is a slow tentative progress, fraught with dangers, until the short swift road of intuition can be followed; and there is no safe intuition without some familiarity and some knowledge. It takes the mellow experience and the solid learning of the teacher to trace outright the whole in every part, the characteristic features of the man and the artist in each passage. The student is to be guided; and the best preliminary help will be to vitalize and make concrete, as a whole, to his mental sight, the figure which he will, sometime, conjure up for himself piecemeal from the documents. We are here in the typical plane of laboratory, not research work; the final result of the series of operations is as it were given in advance; the beginner has to go through the inductive process in those artificial conditions, so as to fit himself for the independent adventure of discovery. At this stage it is that the life of the author, his manner of being, his dealings with the world, the background of circumstances, social and intellectual, upon which his career and his work stand out, can and should be most usefully presented. This part of the task belongs by right to the teacher; but his set lectures can profitably be supplemented by a course of prescribed reading; and even more serviceable as a training are oral reports, in which the students by

turns give an account of some definite biographical or historical problem.

Full preparation having been gone through, the critical edition selected, and the various prefaces duly read, the text itself is to be tackled; and here it is that the peculiar skill France may have developed in the art of literary interpretation has evolved a technique which is perhaps an original contribution to pedagogy, if not to scholarship. The method of the *explication de texte* has received in this country, as in several others, a good deal of friendly attention; it has been more than once described by fully competent observers; on some occasions, by teachers who had a personal and long experience of its routine. It has been, to my knowledge, tried in several American colleges, with very encouraging success. Everything points to the conclusion that the exercise partly embodies the proper essence of higher studies in the literary, as distinguished from the philological or the historical fields. Under the circumstances, it may not be superfluous to examine it once more at some length.

The technical aspect of the *explication de texte* is simple enough. It consists in the union of two things: an analysis on the one hand; a critical interpretation on the other. That the two elements belong to different sorts of mental behavior, so to say, the former being essentially objective, the latter largely subjective, is a difficulty more specious than valid; the association after all is natural, and works well in practice. Its principle is concrete, and pedagogic or artistic; the spirit of science has very little to do with it; but this spirit has very little to do with life itself, and education, when all is said, is the apprenticeship of living. As a first stage, then, the student is expected to give a clear and connected survey of the passage in hand, study-

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ing its content, bringing out all the author's intentions, and leaving nothing unexplained in the local development or expression of his thought. This elucidation, naturally, requires the use of some plain methodical devices, such as a genuine division of the passage into its several parts, a coherent classification of the themes, and a linking up of the text, in substance, with the work from which it has been extracted. The qualities of mind most necessary here are not only penetration, judgment, a logical habit of thought, a sense of constructive order; for in fact, there is no accurate comprehension of what an author means, without some share of sympathy with his meaning; it is not possible exactly to probe the special intent with which words and phrases have been selected, unless the reader enters intuitively into the inner motives of the choice. Analysis, on this level, is not a purely intellectual act; except when the passage dealt with is merely rational and argumentative, which will hardly happen but with special categories of writers, the content of the piece will be composed of emotions and images as well as ideas. Now emotions and images are only with difficulty considered in themselves, apart from the personality of the writer. The two aspects of the *explication* shade off into each other.

Shall we say that the analysis is to stop at that? And is quality here not amenable by any means to quantity? Emotion, imagery, words, thought patterns, rhythm, tone patterns: could not those elements of the text be subjected to a more searching, a more precise investigation? They are the very chapter-heads in a significant book, that came recently from that great centre of English studies, the University of Chicago.¹ The venture, outstanding in its

¹ *New Methods for the Study of Literature*, by Edith Rickert; Chicago, 1927.

thoroughness, is typical of many other attempts to reintroduce into the process of literary interpretation itself that quantitative spirit, which ruled so long in the external history of letters, and which we tried to exorcise from the genetic explanation of works. As such, and whatever its ability, the purpose of the book seems to us limited in its fulfillment by the invincible resistance which æsthetic and moral values oppose to all mechanical treatment. But that within a moderate scope the method is not fruitful, no one who has given it a fair trial will be tempted to say. Diagrams and arithmetical devices may be applied to the measuring and figuring out of the instinctive subtle preferences of artists and poets. They will not deaden the soul of enjoyment, and may even enliven it. They are an apt index of the modicum of mechanism that the life of the human spirit never goes without. Of course, they should not become an obsession, and hide the reality of the artistic impulse behind a stiff symbolization of its working; their artificiality is not to be lost sight of. Least of all should they point the way to literary creation, as they are not compatible with spontaneity. But advanced students may profitably learn to adapt those rigid patterns on to the ever not quite exact course of inspiration; by so doing, they will not only heighten the sense of their own ingenuity, but also usefully quicken their awareness of the harmonies and correspondences of verbal expression.

To account properly for the substance of a single page, thus demands a sufficient acquaintance with the purport and progress of the book; and this mental realization of interdependence, this sense of organic wholes, is the main requisite of the second stage, to which we come now. Here the student has to perform on a modest scale the operation of criticism. Two sets of data are at his disposal; one is par-

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ticular, and made up of the thousand and one intimations of the author's purport and mood, into which his utterance, once properly scrutinized and fully lived through, is resolved. The other is more general, and comprises the total knowledge and impression of the writer's personality, which has previously been gathered from reading and study, together with the very significance of the passage in hand, not as a complex of individual meanings, but as a living expression of a mental life. Those two sets of elements are originally distinct, but hardly remain so; the synthesis is effected in flashes; like goes to like, affinities find each other out, and the mood of the passage is illuminated by being fused with the mental organization out of which it grew, and a part of which it remains. This intuitive perception of the why and the wherefore of a text is thus nothing else but the realization of the intimate necessary dependence which links it up with the being, thought and art of a writer. As in criticism properly so called, we have here the reading of the development which has produced the expression of a mind, and so an interpretation of that mind itself; but the scope in the present instance is not so wide, the object being limited; that psychological interpretation, instead of being sought for its own sake, is called in only as a means to an end, which is and remains the elucidation of a single passage. A satisfactory *explication de texte* should not grow out of bounds, and aim at setting up the full-length portrait of an author; it should rather, from the brief but suggestive evocation of a personality, latent in a given utterance, derive the light that is just needed to illuminate the utterance itself. If it rises from the particular to the general, it returns at once, with a firmer assurance, to the particular problem from which it started.

The power upon which the whole operation revolves, is the magnetism which attracts to one another the fit elements of the synthesis that is preparing. That force, though elusive, is not exactly mysterious; it grows with the growth of certain faculties, and it is fed by certain experiences and labors of the mind; indirectly at least, we can thus catch a glimpse of its nature. It is mainly the subtle sense of affinities; and although the field of its exercise is here that of art, those affinities in themselves are not so much æsthetic, as psychological. What makes a student able to practise successfully that explanation of an isolated passage in the light of the original creative temperament which impregnates it, is his being gifted with the intuitive divination of personality; an instinct that enters easily and swiftly into the laws of mutual dependence, by which mental traits and characteristics are bound together, and which govern their organization into possible wholes. Now the art of life consists mainly in reading character, and interpreting the conditions of things; a shrewd instinct of possibilities and congruity is at the root of common sense; and moral judgment itself is largely governed by that delicate appreciation of fine shades. We are led to realize that a training in critical interpretation, thus understood, does impart to higher literary studies the value of a spiritual culture, and is conducive to a more interior knowledge of man.

Those remarks may well seem to have deflected the course of our inquiry from the ground where we had chosen to place, and tried to maintain it: the most ordinary unpretending level of acquaintance with literature, as pursued by the common run of students. But while the process under dissection looked perhaps somewhat strained, the process in being is plain, normal and reassuring enough. The *explication de texte* is done every day by quiet, average

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young men and women, though it attracts of course the more brilliant, and can then become a labor of love, performed with enthusiasm; it is not necessarily a schooling for intended critics or men of letters; it is simply an exercise for the development of psychological insight, as the best, the only means to acquire literary perception. In that modest routine, with no wordy pretentiousness, and a good deal of academic caution, the faculty of valid criticism—valid because sincere—which is latent in every mind, can best be stimulated and encouraged; no more should be needed to recommend it. May the future spare us the plague of a pan-critical age, with a Babel of shrill individualities aggressively expressing themselves. But the desire and the power of seeing and feeling for oneself the grounds of one's literary likes and dislikes, and of interpreting books in terms of intellectual life, might be conceded to all partakers in a civilization which lays stress on the full development of every being. And should that addition to the usual routine of higher studies contribute to humanize somewhat the present atmosphere of literary departments, there might be a majority among our American colleagues and friends to think that it was not, when all was considered, a change for the worse.

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